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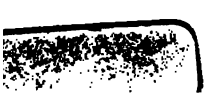

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THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING IN THE WORLD

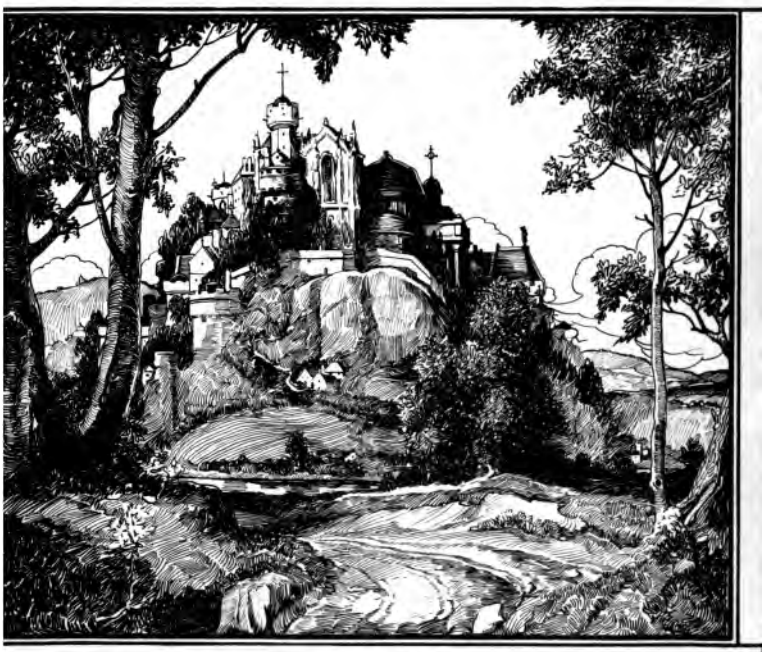
BY

FLETCHER HARPER SWIFT

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

GEORGE ALFRED WILLIAMS



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The Most Beautiful Thing in the World

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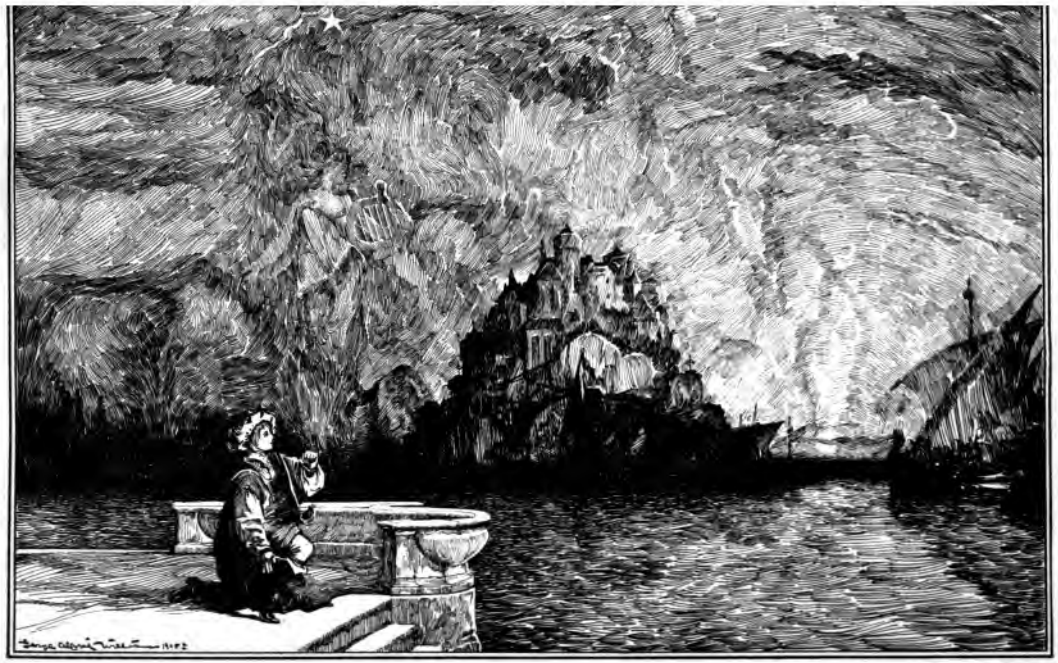
The Most Beautiful Thing in the World.

WHAT is the most beautiful thing in the world? Can any one tell? What would the wisest man in the world say? Is there anything more beautiful than the king's palace? These are some of the questions that the people who lived within the Kingdom of Rerum used to ask. No matter how much they wondered what the most beautiful thing in the world was, no one dared ask when inside the palace of King Timen, or when with any one who might tell the King that the question had been asked. Why they did not dare, every

one in all the land of Rerum knew, and every one else can find out if they will open the old chronicles which contain the proclamations of King Timen.

When King Timen was a very young prince, he became famous far and wide for his love of whatever was beautiful. He would spend hours on the shore of the quiet lake in front of his father's palace, merely gazing at the water, the mountains, and the sky. At the sight of beautiful flowers he was seen to burst into tears for no other reason than because they were so beautiful. Indeed, there was nothing beautiful which he ever heard of that he did not at once wish to see and to possess. When he became king, this desire grew to such an extent that none of the things he had



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satisfied him; even the magnificent palace in which his father and grandfather had reigned, to his eyes became more and more dull and ugly, until he actually loathed it. So one day he called his counselors around him, and after telling them how very unhappy he was, he cried out: "My lords, I am going to build me a palace which shall be, and which all men everywhere shall declare to be the most beautiful thing in the world. But I am a poor king. The Kingdom of Rerum is small and my royal treasury is small. Therefore call together my armies; take what money we have, hire soldiers, and set about to conquer the kingdoms which lie next to mine, and bring me their gold and wealth, in order that I may be able to build this palace."

The King's orders were obeyed. His soldiers were gathered together, and led out to subdue the surrounding peoples. Marvelous success attended them. In a few years King Timen was master of all the world of which any one knew in those days. His generals brought to him the gold and jewels of the conquered kings, and the rulers and their subjects were either put to death or compelled to work as slaves in building the palace which was to be the most beautiful thing in the world, and which was already spoken of as "The Palace Beautiful."

The King was very proud of his palace, and he had reason to be. It would take many books to describe the wonderful groves that enclosed it, the beautiful views that could be

seen from every window. Wherever one went and wherever one looked, it seemed as though the last thing he beheld was more beautiful than anything he had seen before. Floors of yellow gold and white ivory, ceilings of purple amethyst and pearls, supported by marble columns between which swung chains of diamonds and opals. Surely no one could dream of a more beautiful place.

When the Palace Beautiful was finished, the King held a great feast to celebrate its completion. He ordered all his subjects far and wide to come and pass before his throne and say, "O Noble King, I bless thee that thou hast built this marvelous palace, and hast permitted mine eyes to behold it. I have gazed upon many things in earth and heaven, O King, but

surely this palace of thine is the most beautiful thing in the world." This was a very long speech, and I do not suppose the littlest children were compelled to learn it; but this I do know, that every one who was old enough to learn it, was obliged to; and if any one refused to say it, he was to be placed in a dungeon for the rest of his life, or else put to death.

There was only one man in the whole realm of whom King Timen was afraid. This was his chief magician. King Timen's chief magician was not like most magicians. He, of course, could do the mysterious things that kings' magicians can always do; he could change sand into bread or money. He could pass through walls, and walk on the air, or disappear in a cloud of smoke. All this he could

do and much beside, like other magicians but he was different from other magicians, for he was a very good man, and would never use his powers to injure others, not even when the King wished him to. Nobody knew how old he was nor where he came from, but every one knew that he was the wisest and oldest man in the Kingdom of Rerum.

It is not to be wondered at that the King should fear such a wise and powerful man, and that he should be especially anxious to know whether he would say that the Palace Beautiful was the most beautiful thing in the world; for the magician, as every one said, knew everything in the world, and always spoke the truth.

If the people in Rerum land thought the magician was anxious to see the

palace, they were very much mistaken. As soon as the King began building it, the magician shut himself up in his tower with his books and his seven black owls, and refused to see any one. When the time of the feast arrived the King sent for him, however, and ordered him to go into every room in the palace, and then return to the throne-room and repeat the speech which every one else had repeated.

The magician came down from his tower in his long black robe. His white beard swept the golden palace floors as he walked, and his favorite black owl sat on his shoulder. He went into every room and looked at everything long and carefully. It seemed as though he did not merely look at the things he saw; he seemed to look

through them. Yet it was noticed by some of those present that the magician spent more time looking into the faces of the King's subjects and slaves than he did in looking at the fountains sparkling in basins of onyx, or at the carving on the walls, or at all the other marvelous and beautiful things.

When at last he had seen all, and it took him nearly a week, he told the soldiers to lead him to the King. As he entered the room he saw the King wrapped in his ermine robe, seated on a throne of solid ruby. The precious stones in the crown King Timen wore shone so brilliantly that it was almost as hard to look at as at the sun. On either side of the King stood deep lines of soldiers. Soft fragrance filled the room. Not a sound

could be heard except the low voice of those who were kneeling at the throne. There was a great procession passing before the throne, and every one as he reached it knelt, and each one said the words which he had learned to say: "O Noble King, I bless thee that thou hast built this marvelous palace, and hast permitted mine eyes to behold it. I have gazed upon many things in earth and heaven, O King, but surely this palace of thine is the most beautiful thing in the world."

One by one they knelt and arose, and each one as he passed on brought the magician, who was the last in the procession, a step nearer the throne. When the magician was about to kneel a trumpet was sounded. In a few moments the throne-room was filled with a mass of people. Every-

body was anxious to see the strange old man who had shut himself up in the tower, and to hear him speak. No one, however, expected he would say anything different from what all the others had said, because every one, as well as the magician, knew just what to say. Besides, there was nothing else any one could say, for surely nothing in the world could be more beautiful than the Palace Beautiful, and that was all any one was asked or expected to say.

Although every one knew just what the magician should say, yet the room was so silent when he knelt, you could almost hear your heart beat. As the magician prostrated himself before the throne he caught his long white beard in his hands, and when he arose he appeared to some

of the people very much like a statue in a waterfall, for he had wrapped his beard about his head and face in such a way that it covered him completely. This was the sign that he refused to speak. The King's face turned white, then flushed red with anger. His rage was so great that at first he could not speak. He trembled from head to foot. The people shrank back toward the doors. The soldiers looked down at the floor, dreading to hear what the King would say.

At last King Timen spoke, and for once he seemed to forget that he was afraid of the magician and his power. He rose from his throne and said in quick, cutting tones that sounded like the cracking of a whip: "Magician, for many years have I and my family

cared for thee. For many years hast thou eaten our bread, drunk our wine, and lived in our palace. Seven years ago thou didst leave our royal presence and didst shut thyself up in a tower of darkness. All this time have I overlooked thine indifference to me. But to-day I have asked thee to declare thine admiration for a palace I have spent many years in building. Many a battlefield is stained with the blood of generals who died that I and my people might build the Palace Beautiful. I have given wealth, years, and friends to build it; but thou who art richest in power and wisdom hast given nothing, and now thou refusest to speak. Dost thou think that I will longer allow thee thus to insult me and the work of my hand here in the presence of my

people? By my life and kingdom, I order thee to speak!"

Slowly the magician uncovered his face. Then looking back at the furious King, he said, "O King, thy father I knew, and thy father's father I knew, and his father I knew. I have, it is true, lived in their palaces, drunken their wine, and eaten at their board. Thou art different from them all. Some of them gloried in wealth; others gloried in war; thy great passion is for the beautiful. Thou hast built thyself a palace, O King. Thou hast named it the Palace Beautiful. Thou has named it well, for it is a beautiful palace." The magician ceased speaking and bowed low. The black owl, who was still perched on his shoulder, nodded its head very slowly, as if in approval.

After a pause the King said: "Magician, thou hast said my palace is beautiful. This is scant praise for such a monument of wonder as the Palace Beautiful. Knowest thou that thou art the only one of all my subjects who has hesitated to declare it to be the most beautiful thing in the world? Knowest thou of anything more beautiful?"

At these words an expression of deep trouble and sadness overspread the kind face of the old man. Leaning toward the King, he said in a pleading, agitated voice: "Have mercy, my Lord. I crave thy pardon, but do not compel me to answer that question."

The face of the King grew more stern and angry than before: "Unless thou answerest it, thou shalt

be driven from my presence forever."

After a moment of painful silence, the magician spoke again. "Since thou commandest me, O King, I must reply. There is something in the world more beautiful than thy palace."

At these words the face of the King underwent a marvelous change. Astonishment, followed by pain, which ended in a wild, frenzied longing, spread over his features. To himself he murmured: "Something more beautiful than my palace? Ah, I knew there must be," and then he said aloud to the magician: "Thou shalt bring it to me. It shall be mine."

"I cannot bring it to thee."

"That is to say, thou wilt not," cried the King. "Soldiers, seize the

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magician! take from him his wand, lest he use his magic and escape; place him in the dungeon; let him be beaten daily with two hundred stripes until he consents to procure for me what he thinks is the most beautiful thing in the world."

The soldiers feared to lay hold of the magician, but nevertheless approached him. As they drew near, the old man waved his wand. There was a strange sound like the buzzing of many bees; a mist filled the palace hall; the magician vanished.

When the mist cleared away, the people looked at the King. He was pale, or else the light from the jewels in his crown made him appear so. The displeasure still showed faintly in his countenance, but he spoke in kind and gentle tones as he invited

the people to join in the feast which had long been waiting for them. The people soon forgot the unpleasant disturbance, and feasted and danced until the break of day. Then they all went to their homes to talk over what they had seen in the Palace Beautiful, and the strange way in which the magician had acted, and how suddenly he had vanished.

The day following the feast, and for many days after, King Timen wandered through his palace, gazing long and sorrowfully at everything he saw. He went from room to room, now looking at some wonderful jewel, now at some beautiful statue, here at a lovely vase, or there at a picture. He seemed to love most of all to look out of one of the windows upon a lake which lay between two dark mountains.

Yet a deeper and deeper sadness seemed to come over him. For no matter how beautiful was the object he looked upon, he would sigh deeply to himself and say, "There is something else in this world more beautiful, but I shall never possess it."

One day he called his four most trustworthy generals to him. He commanded the first of them to go north, the second south, the third east, and the fourth west, and to search far and wide throughout the earth until they should find something more beautiful than the Palace Beautiful.

After three years the generals returned and were summoned before the King. They came into his presence empty-handed. Bowing low, they said: "O King, we have

searched east and west, north and south. We have been all over the earth, and yet we have failed to find anything as beautiful as thy palace. Be content, O King, for this palace of thine is the most beautiful thing in the world."

The King listened to his generals, but their words failed to cheer him. Indeed, what they said made him only more melancholy. He had had some hope until they spoke. Now his last hope had become a shattered goblet, without any power to hold longer even a drop of consolation. All alone he sat and wept, wept with a longing to behold the most beautiful thing in the world. At midnight he cried out in despair: "O magician, where art thou? If thou wouldst only return and tell me what the

most beautiful thing in the world is, I would give all I have, yea, even my own life to possess it."

No sooner had King Timen said these words than he felt a soft touch on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw the magician standing beside him. In a low voice the magician said : "I have seen thy tears, O King, and heard thy words."

King Timen, unable to speak at first, now cried out in appealing tones : "Magician, pity me. I am a King, but I am the most unhappy man in all the world. Bring to me the most beautiful thing in the world and restore peace to my soul and sleep to mine eyes."

"The most beautiful thing in the world," responded the magician, "is something which I cannot bring to

thee. It can be seen and felt, but cannot be handled. No one but he who is brave enough to give up everything else for it can ever hope to possess it. If thou desirest to behold it, I can take thee where it may be seen."

"Is it far from here?" asked the King.

"It is far from thee, and yet it is very near here," answered the magician.

"Wherever it is," cried King Timen, "and no matter how long it takes to find it, take me to see it, for I shall never be happy again till I behold it and strive to possess it."

The magician wrapped his long black coat about himself and the King, and in a few moments the two were out of the palace, floating over

the tops of the forests, swifter than the wind.

After several hours the King fell asleep. When he awoke he found himself in the most beautiful garden he had ever seen. As far as the eye could see there seemed to be nothing but acres and acres of most lovely flowers, bending under the impulse of a soft breeze. White roses among tall purple lilies; red roses climbing up and forming towers of fragrance, swaying lines and fragrant billows of blue, gold, and scarlet. What seemed most wonderful of all to King Timen was that none of the roses had thorns, and that, as they swayed in the breeze, they gave forth soft, sweet music like a thousand fairy harps played at twilight. Very soon the King heard the voices of children

singing, and in a moment the garden was thronged with them. The magician drew the King into a corner and told him to be silent and watch. After a time the children began picking the flowers. Soon each one had his arms full. They were so happy and their faces were so beautiful, that as King Timen looked at them he could not tell which were more beautiful, the children or the flowers. He whispered softly to the magician: "I understand now why thou couldst not say my palace was the most beautiful thing in the world. This garden is more beautiful than my palace. This must be the most beautiful thing in the world."

The King had barely finished speaking when the scene before him underwent a dark and fearful change.

Out from behind a bank of flowers stole a hideous man with a whip in his hand. With him were ten black slaves. Each carried a long chain and a whip made of rose-thorns, They caught the children and bound them with the rose-thorn chains, beating them all the while with the whips. The wails of the little ones filled the air. King Timen tried to break loose from the magician to help the children, but found he could move neither hand nor foot. Thus compelled to remain, he closed his eyes until the cries of the children ceased. When he looked again he could see none of them ; only the garden full of flowers, rarer and more lovely than those blossoming there before.

" Where are the children? " asked the King.

The magician pointed to the flowers.

"What do you mean?"

"They are flowers now. The garden belongs to the monster you saw enter with slaves. They entice the children hither, and change them into flowers."

"What do they do with the flowers?"

"Sell them to the rich and powerful."

"Take me out of this fearful place," pleaded the King, and a moment later he found himself with the magician floating again high over the earth. King Timen was too sad to speak. He remained silent and thoughtful. It was the magician who spoke first: "That is an old, old garden."

"Whose garden is it?" asked the King.

"It is the GARDEN OF SELFISHNESS."

"And whose children were those?"

"They are nobody's children, only the foundlings of fortune."

King Timen now saw that they were coming close to the earth, and were swiftly approaching a castle. Soon they were inside a great dining-hall. A feast was spread on the tables. The lord of the palace and his guests sat down and ate. King Timen had never in all his life beheld such a beautiful palace, such a dining-hall, such dishes, such furniture, such a gathering of noble-looking people.

After the lord and his guests had finished, they went out. Immediately the tables were reladen with a fresh feast. The doors opened again and there entered a company of just

as many people as had left, but those who came in now were clothed in rags and their bones almost stuck through their skin. They were so weak with hunger they could barely walk to the tables.

They sat down and began to eat, gulping their food like starved dogs. Within the room there was not a sound except the clatter of the dishes. Outside a storm was raging and a cold wind blew through the windows.

"What a beautiful palace this is!" cried the King. "The palace itself is far more beautiful than the Palace Beautiful. Moreover, every one here, rich and poor, dines like a king."

A long, cruel laugh sounded through the hall, and the lord of the palace came rushing in with his friends and servants. They overturned the tables

and tossed the hungry men and children out of the windows into the dark and storm.

King Timen could not bear to look longer. He closed his eyes and shuddered. "Take me from this place!" he cried to the magician. "I cannot endure it. What I thought was the most beautiful place in the world has a second time turned out to be the most dreadful."

The magician looked at the King. "Wilt thou not wait and see the lord of the palace and his guests dance? Notice how handsome the women are and how beautiful are their gowns and the jewels on their hands."

"Nothing can make them or this place seem beautiful to me after what I have witnessed here," returned King Timen.

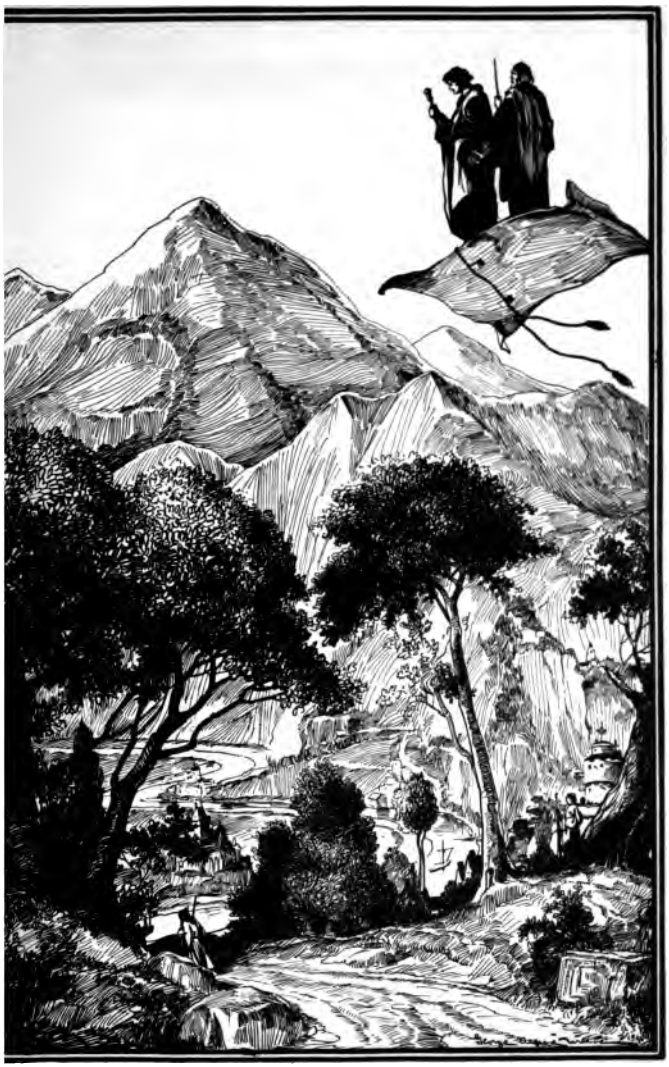
"Then we will go," said the magician, and they left the palace, and were once more sailing through the air, wrapped in the magic cloak.

"What is the name of that palace?" asked the King.

"That," replied the magician, "is the Palace of PRIDE and FEAR."

"Magician," said the King, "do not show me any more gardens or palaces. Show me now some beautiful landscape, the most beautiful one in the world, and I will be content."

The magician pointed down at the earth, and the King gave a cry of joy. Had any one ever dreamed of such beauty? The country that he beheld was so beautiful that to describe it would be impossible. A range of purple mountains stretched shoulder to shoulder across the sky. Beyond



"Show Me Some Beautiful Landscape." *Page 30.*

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them was the sea, golden and rose, dimpling in the light of the rising sun. Through a narrow opening in the mountain wall a silver river went leaping toward the sea, bearing a message from three sister lakes that lay half hidden, caressing and cooling the storm-beaten faces of the hills. Nothing was lacking to make the scene perfect. The King, whose heart was sick with the dreadful sights he had beheld in the garden and in the palace, looked down upon the peaceful scene before him and sighed with relief.

"Ah, magician," at length he cried, "not the palace nor royal garden which any king has made, but this scene which I look upon, is the most beautiful thing in the world. Take me back to my kingdom now; I will

gather my armies and come and win this land for my own."

The magician made no answer, but simply pointed first east and then west. King Timen looked and saw two kings rapidly approaching with thousands of men. They came over the mountains, cutting their way where no path opened. King Timen had never seen such fine soldiers, and his heart beat fast with joy as he beheld them, young, strong, and brave, every one.

"Are these kings friends or foes?" asked King Timen.

"They are the bitterest enemies," replied the magician.

"Are they going to fight for the possession of this lake?"

"Yes, and they will all be killed."

"What a pity to have such splen-

did armies destroyed! Why are they willing to fight to the death for a bit of land?"

"Why didst thou ask me to take thee back to thy armies?" the magician rejoined.

The King was silent. The battle on the shore of the lake soon began. It continued for five days and nights. At the end of this time not a man in either army was alive except the kings. These two continued fighting until finally they fainted from loss of blood. Everywhere were piles of the bodies of the dead. Every rock and log was red with blood, and the lake and all the streams that flowed out of it were as red as wine.

King Timen had pleaded again and again with the magician to take him away. He said, "I behold here the

thing I have been seeking for years. This lake and all this spot is the most beautiful thing in the world. Once I loved to watch a battle, but how can I bear to see this lake filled with blood and its lovely flowers crushed with the heaps of the dead?"

Not until the battle was over would the magician take the King away.

"Ought we not to remain and help the two kings?" asked King Timen, as he and the magician started to depart.

"They will soon recover. No one can injure them seriously. They will live for many hundreds of years, though the armies they lead are daily cut to pieces."

"What are their names?"

"Their names," answered the magician, with a strange, sad smile, "are MINE and THINE."

"O magician," cried the King, "this world would be a beautiful place if there were no men in it. God made it beautiful, but men make the most beautiful places hideous. The most beautiful thing in the world would be this earth without men. Tell me, is there no way to get this?"

"Thou hast spoken wisely, O King. It is indeed men who make these loveliest places hideous. I have shown thee the world as it is, and the most marvelous places in it as they are. What thou longest to see is the world as it was. Wave this wand three times and thou shalt behold the earth as God first made it, without men."

The King waved the magician's wand three times. A fine dust filled

the air, blown along by the wind. The magician pointed to it and said, "There are now no people in the world."

The King felt relieved at once; the sorrow he had suffered after his recent experiences left him. In company with the magician he was soon rapidly sailing over the earth. How beatiful and calm it was; he could not keep from singing as he looked at it.

Faster and faster the King and the magician travelled. Everything they saw seemed the perfection of beauty. Green waterfalls, wide rivers, snow-capped mountains, yellow fields of goldenrod, brilliant plains of green palms and red tropical flowers, and birds singing everywhere. The animals in the forest did not hide be-

cause they had no one to fear. The birds and squirrels were as tame as rabbits; nothing seemed to frighten them.

"Flowers, birds, sunshine, sweetness; this is the lost paradise!" cried King Timen. "Nothing in the world could be more beautiful than this."

They travelled on and on. At last they had seen everything and were on a second journey over the earth. The King was sitting on the magic cloak, which in their travel floated, spread out like a cloud, when all at once he discovered that the magician was gone.

He called and called, but no answer came. At first he was very much frightened. Then he began to be very lonely. At last he realized that he was the only human being left

in all the world. A week passed and a second week, and a third. At the end of this time the King was so lonely that he tried to make friends with a grasshopper, that had somehow or other got on to the magician's cloak. From very loneliness he would talk to the little fellow, just as if he were a real person, and the grasshopper would jump about and spead his wings in a very friendly fashion.

Finally, one day the King said to the grasshopper: "My little friend, unless the magician comes back today, I shall surely jump over into the sea. I thought this world a dreadful place before, when I saw how horrible all the beautiful places in it were made by the cruel and selfish people who lived in them. I thought all would

be settled if we could only get rid of the people, and so I waved the wand."

Here the grasshopper raised his black, shiny wings three times, exactly as if he understood.

King Timen continued: "But this earth without people is far more horrible than it was before. I can endure it no longer. I wonder, if I should wave the wand again, if it would bring the people back?"

The grasshopper looked very knowing, and spread out his wings, as if he approved the idea.

"Well, it will do no harm to try," said King Timen, whereupon he waved the wand. Immediately a fine dust filled the air, and in it King Timen saw the forms of men, women, and children taking shape and

floating down to the earth. In a few moments the whole world was again covered with people. As night came on, out of the windows of the houses, which had been dark for so many, many nights, bright candles beamed. Once more King Timen saw mothers in the doorways with their babes in their arms. Once more he heard the church bells which had been silent so long, when there was no one to ring them. Yet sweeter to his ears than the sounds of bells came the voices of children singing songs and saying their evening prayers. Overcome with joy at the sight of the earth peopled once more, he could do nothing but say, "O what a beautiful place! O what a beautiful place!" Yet even while he was saying these words, he saw a man beating his horse in the streets

and some boys torturing a helpless dog; and, as the cloak descended nearer the earth, he heard cruel words and saw so many unkind and unhappy faces that he could not help but think again that all the lovely places in the world were spoiled by the people who lived in them. In fact, I imagine he began to wonder whether he would not have acted more wisely if he had not brought the people back, for he could see the armies of Mine and Thine marching down to the lake, and, nearer, the children going into the Garden of Selfishness, and far away rose the towers of the Castle of Pride and Fear. Next he wondered what had become of the magician, and said aloud:

"I have been on a long journey to find the most beautiful thing in the

world. The magician said that when I saw it and felt it, I would know it, but so far, alas! I have seen nothing that I want."

How it happened, King Timen did not know, but before he had finished these words he found himself once more in his own palace. He looked around, hardly knowing whether or not he was glad to be back. The palace was full of people, and yet nobody seemed to take any notice of him. He wondered why it was, and stepped in front of a mirror to see if he could discover anything in his dress which would explain matters. To his great surprise he saw that in the time he had been absent he seemed to have grown twenty years younger. His hair, which had been sprinkled with gray when he set out

on his journey, had turned to bright gold. His cheeks were pink. His face was like the face of a boy. This was not all; he was dressed like one of the servants, whose duty it was to wait on the tables. He had not recovered from his amazement at this change when he heard the palace butler calling for all the table guards to come and wait on the guests. King Timen knew he must go, yet he stood motionless where he was. An officer, who had watched him looking at himself in the mirror, walked up to him and asked him how long he expected to keep the lords and ladies waiting.

King Timen had never suffered as much in all his life as he did on that and the following days. Of course he did not know what he ought to do or how to do it. He was so nervous

that he dropped costly dishes and spilt wine on the guests. No one had any sympathy for him. He was called blockhead and cuffed. Finally, he in some way offended a great noble, and was taken to the prison, where he was beaten until he could not rise from the floor, and at last tossed like a log into a dark and loathsome cell. Here he lay bleeding and moaning, too weak and sick to think of anything. It seemed as if his whole body were one great sore. After a time he fainted, or became half unconscious from weakness and misery. How long he lay thus he did not know. When he recovered, he heard some one speaking beside him. He had never heard such a sweet, kind voice, and at first he did not open his eyes, because he thought he must be dream-

ing, and was afraid if he awoke the voice would cease. At length the voice did cease, and he felt a hand bathing his head with cool water and washing his wounds.

"Thine eyes are very badly hurt," said the voice. "I must cover them with a bandage, or thou wilt go blind."

The King said nothing, but he wondered who it could be that cared whether he went blind or not. Perhaps it was because he was weak; perhaps it was because he was lonely; but, anyway, tears stole out of King Timen's eyes and fell on the floor of the dungeon cell.

"I cannot leave thee here. The poisonous gases which escape from these walls will kill thee," said the voice. "This cell is one King Timen had built in which to confine any one

he wished to put to death, but did not dare to kill outright. Besides, there is no bed here, not even a bundle of straw."

King Timen next felt two strong arms placed firmly but tenderly about him, and then he was carried for some distance and laid on a bed. Here he remained for a week or longer. His new friend never ceased to care for him. The same gentle hands brought him food and dressed his wounds. King Timen learned to love those hands. Sometimes he would raise them to his lips and kiss them.

One day he said: "How long will it be before I can take this bandage from mine eyes?"

"Only a few days," answered the friend. "Art thou growing tired of being in the dark?"

"Not so tired of being in the dark as tired of waiting to see thy face."

"Why dost thou wish to see my face?"

"Because I know it will be the most beautiful face I have ever seen."

"My whole face and both my hands are scarred with marks left by a dreadful disease I had soon after they brought me here. Thou wilt be disappointed if thou expectest my face to be beautiful."

"If thy face does not prove to be the most beautiful face I have ever seen, I am sure it will be the kindest, and that is much the same thing."

That afternoon King Timen grew so impatient to see his friend that he decided to risk taking the bandage off his eyes. He waited until he heard the jailer's step upon the dungeon

stairs. His friend always left him at this time to go to the cell door and receive the food. King Timen took off the bandage, and this is what he saw :

The jailer opened the door and brought in a tray laden with wine, fruit, and food. King Timen's friend placed the viands on a table and talked pleasantly with the jailer. After he went away, the King's friend put aside a small portion of the food which had been brought to him. He passed the rest through the bars of the cell, and then squeezed through himself. Once out in the corridor he went from cell to cell, handing to the inmates the food which had been intended for himself.

When he came back, King Timen asked him where he had been. "I

have been taking food to the other prisoners."

"Do they not all have the same food?"

"No; most of them are only common prisoners; they get only brown bread and water."

"Thou receivest other things?"

"Yes, I am a royal prisoner, and so they bring me other things."

"And thou dividest what they bring thee and sharest it with the others?"

"Yes," laughed the friend. "You see, I have been here a long time, and am often very lonely. If I ate all they brought me, I could never squeeze through the bars to go to talk with my friends."

King Timen did not ask any more questions. He did not know just

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what to say. When night came he could not sleep for some reason. He got up and felt his way over to the one window in the cell. This window looked out upon the sea. The moon was shining, and a ray of light made its way into the cell and fell on the face of King Timen's friend, who was asleep on the stone floor. The King looked first at the moonlight, and then at the face on which it shone.

"What is the most beautiful thing in the world?" It was the voice of the magician. The King was startled by the sound, but the magician was so calm and quiet that King Timen's fears vanished, yet he could not speak.

Again the magician asked him: "What is the most beautiful thing in the world?"

"What is the Most Beautiful Thing in the World?" *Page 50*

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King Timen turned and pointed at his friend, who lay stretched in sleep on the cold, hard floor.

"What dost thou mean?" asked the magician.

"I mean," said the King, "that a loving life, a life which is full of kind deeds and thoughts, the life which finds its greatest joy in giving up to others what is its own, the life which, amid its own sorrow and suffering, thinks of the suffering and sorrow of other lives—that is the most beautiful thing in the world. Magician, once thou didst show me the most beautiful garden, the most magnificent palace, the most lovely landscape mine eyes had ever beheld. The beauty of each of these was destroyed by the unkindness and selfishness that filled it and which ruled it. Then I asked

thee, and thou didst show me, the earth without men, and though at first it seemed perfect, after a time I learned that the earth without men would be like a harp without strings. Here in this prison I have seen and felt and learned to know the most beautiful thing in the world."

"Dost thou understand now why I said I could not procure it for thee, but that any man who was brave enough, and desired it enough to give up everything else for it, might possess it?"

"Yes," answered King Timen, "I understand."

It was a strange scene: the great, dark cell, dimly lit by the moonlight; the sleeper on the floor; the magician with his black owl on his shoulder, and his long white beard

sweeping down to his feet. The King and the magician walked over and stood beside the sleeper. As they did so, the moon went under a cloud. Perhaps it was only fancy, but it seemed as though a light stole out from the sleeper's face like the light from a pure precious stone, and lit up the darkness. Thus they stood long and silent. The King's hands were clasped as if he were in prayer. At last he stooped down and lifted the sleeper very gently from the floor on to the bed, and then lay down himself on the cold, hard stones, falling asleep full of the peace and the joy which came to him because he had found, and now had begun to possess, the most beautiful thing in the world.

The next morning when King Timen

awoke, he found himself lying, not on the stone floor of the dungeon, but at the foot of his throne in the Palace Beautiful. The costly robes he wore were creased and damp, as if he had travelled in them a long distance. His hair was matted. Whether he had tangled it with his hands while he slept, or whether it had been many days since it was combed, I do not know.

King Timen arose, ascended his throne, called his court around him, and proceeded to relate his experiences. It took him three days and a half to tell all his adventures. Probably some who listened wondered whether his journey was not all a dream. I see no reason for thinking it was. Certainly the old chronicle of Rerum Land does not

record it as such. If there were any persons who were in doubt about it in King Timen's day, they only had to be told how strangely the King disappeared one night, and how he was found a month later in the early morning asleep at the foot of his throne.

Something else, however, which every one admitted proved beyond a doubt that King Timen's adventures were not a dream, was the change in his life. He laid aside his magnificent robes, and donned a simple suit of black velvet. He no longer spent his time making plans of how he might procure things for himself. The hours he had once been accustomed to spend feasting, or listening to music, or dreaming, he now passed in going from one part of his

realm to another. No life was too humble to interest him; no cottage too lowly for him to enter. In this way he learned to know the needs of his people, and no one in trouble ever came to him in vain. He was so gentle in his manner that as he travelled alone from village to village, many who met him failed to recognize in him the proud King Timen of long ago, but thought him some nobleman of moderate means on a journey. Often as he rode along he would dismount from his horse, and place on it some worn traveller or weary child, and as he walked alongside he would tell them the story of the most beautiful thing in the world, and every one who heard the story loved it, and when they reached home would talk about the strange

man, and relate the story he had told them. Year by year the story spread, and more and more people began to understand it, and to believe in it. So that when King Timen was old, and his hair grew white, Rerum Land became known throughout the world as the Land Beautiful, not because of its beautiful scenery and beautiful houses, but because every one said that there were to be found the most beautiful things in the world—beautiful lives.